

CHALLENGES TO TOURISM INDUSTRY OF MANIPUR IN THE POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC ERA

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ABSTRACT

The State of Manipur is a unique place, both in terms of cultural diversity and geography as it offers a glimpse into not only 'Tiny India', but also South-East Asia, all within a space of 22,327sq.km. The Indigenous people of the state have preserved their way of life, their culture, language, customs and traditions through time. Boasting of its flawless natural beauty and surrounded by blue hills, Manipur is the ideal place for anyone looking for peace and tranquility or even vibrant cultural festivals. With its untouched landscapes and rolling hills, Manipur's diverse landscapes reflect the unique culture and traditions of the state. The rich biodiversity and unique ethnicity have been attracting local and foreign travellers to explore the state. This has resulted in significant growth to the state tourism industry over the past decade.

However the Covid-19 Pandemic has halted any form of tourism activity in the province since the beginning of 2020.

This article is a humble attempt to highlight the various challenges Manipur tourism industry faces in the Post Covid 19 Pandemic Era as well as supportive measures that can uplift and promote such a growing industry with great vigor.

KEYWORDS: *Post Covid-19 Pandemic, Tourism Industry & Government of Manipur*

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INTRODUCTION

Manipur is located in the north eastern part of India. It is one of the seven sister states of the north-east India. The geography of the state is split up into two; the hills and the valley. The capital of the state, Imphal is located in the valley which is the heart of the state. Manipur is endowed with immense tourism potential and with its vast cultural heritage, varied natural attractions and unique gastronomy. In January 1987 Tourism was given an industry status in Manipur. Since then, the government have taken up numerous steps and campaigns to promote tourism in Manipur and take advantage of its inherent potential, rich culture and its youth population to generate employment and sustainable commerce.

The government of Manipur has taken major steps along the years in line with the central government's efforts to promote the states the 'Gate way to South-east Asia'. Numerous infrastructural developments like the Trans-Asian highway, railway connectivity, bridges, water transport, etc. have played a major role in exploration and development of many tourism spots.

Development and promotion of tourism in the state have provided a support system for the local populace to take part in and support the government initiatives. Establishment of hotels, restaurants, resorts, parks, etc., shows large growth in public participation in tourism industry to generate sustainable income and growth. To

envisage new initiatives in making tourism a catalyst in employment generation, development of remote areas, promotion of socio-cultural integration and outreach programs, the government have introduced many tourism policies keeping the state's interest to promote holistic development of the state.

In 2019 the employment generated through tourism rose to 39,821 million jobs in India, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council 2020 which is 8.0% of total employment generated that year. The government of India over the past few years has taken various steps and introduced numerous schemes to promote the Nation as a global tourism destination such as 'Incredible India', 'Atithi Devobhava', 'Swadesh Darshan', 'Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PASAD)', 'National Integrated database of Hospitality Industry (NIDHI)', 'E-tourist Visa Scheme', etc. These schemes have provided the domestic and international travellers with Local guidance, ease of accessing information, transportation and lodging facilities, etc. The government has also promoted and increased participation in various international tourism festivals and events, encouraging student exchange programs, organizing tourist conventions, travel fairs and exhibitions, etc., which have directly impacted in the substantial growth of tourism sector in the country resulting its GDP contribution to grow from a share of 7.70% in 2017 to 9.20% in 2018.

The end of 2019 saw the tourism industry enter its darkest hour with the Covid-19 Pandemic spreading rapidly all over the globe. The industry faced severe changes and overwhelming damages as the global community was gripped by the Pandemic. During the Pandemic India also saw rapid decline in its tourism sector as its GDP contribution declined from 6.78% in 2019 to 4.7% in 2020. By 2021 the tourism industry's contribution to India's GDP and employment has declined by 36.3% and 20.8% respectively. The pandemic although global in its impact, the severity of its impact is diversified locally. As in case of Manipur, the tourism industry which was still finding its roots in the state had to faced devastating scenarios created by the pandemic and major challenges in its efforts to recover from it.

OBJECTIVES

- To emphasize on the current picture of the tourism industry of the state
- To highlight the various steps taken to recover the tourism industry
- To accentuate the need to develop the tourism industry to reach its potential.
- To suggest steps and measure to overcome the challenges faced by the tourism industry in the Post Covid 19 Pandemic Era

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on Primary sources and secondary sources of information. The primary information includes personal interviews with associated authorities of the tourism department of Manipur and people associated with tourist hotspots, hotels, resorts, etc.

Secondary sources includes Economic survey 2019-20 & 2020 -21; Directorate of Economics and statistics, Government of Manipur; Tourism department, Government of Manipur; internet sources including articles, publications and journals on Manipur tourism; newspaper journals and editorials.

REVIEW LITERATURE

Manipur is located strategically in its geography to serve as a tourism destination. The state is home to many unique tourist

attractions like the Loktak lake in Bishnupur which is the largest fresh water lake in India where floating island known as Phumdis are found; Keibul Lamjao National Park located in Manipur is the only floating national park in India which is the home to a highly endangered species of bow antlered deer known as Sangai; Singda located 15kms from Imphal is the highest located mud dam in India surrounded by beautiful lakes and scenic beauty; the Khangkhui Cave in Ukhrul is natural limestone cave with unique Pre-Historic Origins; Ima Keithel located in the heart of the Imphal City is a one of its kind market where all the shops and establishments are run by Women; etc.

Other Renowned Tourist destination of Manipur includes Dzuko Valley, The Mount Iso, Loukoi Pat, Sadu Chiru Waterfall (Sadar Hills), Zailad Lake, War Cemeteries at Hatta Golapati, Shree Shree Govindajee Temple at Palace Compound, Shaheed Minar, Nupi Lal Memorial Complex, Khongjom War Memorial etc.

Manipur is also well known for its rich culture, unique history and various forms of arts and music. Manipur is very unique in its music, dance forms, customs and traditions. The Manipuri dance also known as 'Raas Leela' is unique to the state in high regarded as one of the most beautiful dance form in the world holding a prestigious place as one of its well renowned classical dance. Other famous dance forms of Manipur includes Nupa Pala also known as kartalcholom, performed by Male Artists using cymbals; Khambathoibi dance which is a dance of dedication to the sylvan diety, Thangjing of Moirang; Maibi dance which is ritual dance performed by maibis in Lai Haraoba Festivals of Manipur; etc.

Other unique Tourist Attractions in Manipur include Sagol Kangjei, Sangai Festival, Yubi Lakpi, Hiyang Tannaba (boat race), Thang Ta and Sarit Sarat.

Table 1: Annual Tourist Footfall 2015-20 Source: Manipur Tourism Department

Financial Year	Total no. of Annual Domestic Tourist	Total no. of Annual International Tourist	Total Annual Tourist
2015-16	1,32,010	3,102	1,35,112
2016-17	1,45,685	3,036	1,48,721
2017-18	1,64,483	3,787	1,68,270
2018-19	1,66,032	9794	1,75,826
2019-20	1,67,334	12,102	1,79,436

Geographically 90% of the total area of Manipur lies in the hills which have provided the government with topographical challenges to bring about infrastructural development and social integration with the capital which houses majority of the population of the state. The infrastructure is still underdeveloped in many districts outside the capital region where many tourist destinations are located. In order to exploit its tourism potential the government must bring about rapid development in these areas. Other factors including lack of awareness about the potentials of tourism industry, shortage of accommodations, poor condition and unavailability of roadways and transportation services, political instability and lack of safety assurances to the travellers, Etc., have been the major roadblocks to the growth of the tourism industry in Manipur. With Proper Infrastructure and services in place, the state has the potential to become one of the tourist hotspots in South East Asia

In 2011, Manipur was excluded from Protected Area Regime and the travel regulations were relaxed to kick starts the robust entry of tourists to the state. The number of tourist gradually grew since then and the government has taken up many policies, introduced various schemes and took up many infrastructural projects to support the growth of its tourism industry.

However the beginning of 2020 brought in new challenges to the tourism industry of Manipur in the form of Covid 19 Pandemic. Extensive restrictions, travel ban, and severe lockdowns saw the complete disappearance of tourism activity in the state. While the Government of Manipur was occupied in mitigating the various socio-economic aftermath of the pandemic, the tourism industry remained in total standstill. This has caused major setbacks in not only the development projects of the tourism industry but all maintenance and preservation of tourist's sites and events. The second wave of the pandemic in 2021 dealt an even more disastrous blow to the industry that was hanging by a thread. All the major projects on development of tourism industry came to a complete halt including eco-tourism project of Loktak Lake, Kangleipak Turel Torban renovations, Ima Keithel Renovations, Etc. This had deep and widespread impact on the livelihood of those dependent on the tourism industry.

TOURISM INDUSTRY IN POST COVID 19 PANDEMIC PERIOD

The Year 2020 and 2021 saw tourism as one of the fastest growing industries in modern world which collapsed into severely diminished industry due to Covid -19 Pandemic. The aftermath of such devastating global event provided many challenges for the tourism industry. The need of intensive support and funding was recognized by every form of government in every level to prevent further damage and boost the recovery of the Tourism Industry. In this context the Government of Manipur took many proactive steps and developed intensive support system to boost the recovery of tourism industry of the state.

The major challenges in the aftermath of Covid 19 pandemic for the tourism industry include the vaccines roll out, social distancing measures, awareness programs, rejuvenating and functioning of the tourist sites, financial constraints in maintenance of the tourist spots and events, travel restriction and hesitance, etc. The recovery of the tourism industry began with various steps from the government including removal of travel restriction from both domestic and international travellers, establishing a support system for the tourists who enter the state, diversifying the travel regulations and guidelines to reduce hardships on the travellers, insuring availability of medical support and security parameters to the tourists, Coordination and cooperation with neighboring state's tourism department, North East Council (NEC), etc.

As instructed by the North East Council (NEC), the state Tourism department has submitted 25 names of unexplored tourist spots of Manipur for developmental projects which includes large scale development project to convert Loktak Lake into a global tourist hotspot with all the world class amenities to attract tourists, the construction of the 120-foot-tall statue of a Sagol Kangjei (Polo) player riding a pony at Marjing Hill and construction of a world-class polo ground at the birthplace of modern polo (Ipudhou Marjing Khubham) at Heingang in Imphal East.

The State Government has been actively resuming several projects both in infrastructure, and public health and security. The year 2021 saw large scale expansion of healthcare and medical assistance and support system. New roadways were developed and old roadways were expanded and repaired to help with transportation. Governments allocated special funds for tourism sector for each electoral constituency for development of accommodation facilities for the tourists. Large scale awareness programs and education programs were arranged to highlight the need for changes and adaptations for the locals to coordinate with the efforts of the government to recover the lost businesses and livelihood of the tourism industry.

The end of 2021 saw a rapid rise in tourism demands in the form of homestays, staycations, workstations, etc. Several studies show that post-pandemic tourism moves towards personalized care in local flavor away from the hustles of the cities especially in North-East India. Manipur as a state is very well suited to cater to the popular demands of the

tourism industry. Keeping in mind the concerns of public health protocols and the safety provisions and guidelines, the state, in coordination with the locals, can rebuild the tourism industry to its potential. The government must set the new Tourism Policy to cater to the diversified demands of the post Covid 19 pandemic tourism activities.

In the post Covid19 Pandemic period various market analysis and studies show that the traveller's behavioral pattern have undergone some transformation. Studies show that travellers are moving away from crowded hotspot destinations to quiet and peaceful holiday in an environment that provides a localized 'home away from home' experience. This new trend of tourism is a golden opportunity for the state of Manipur to embrace and adapt to boost the tourism industry of the state.

CONCLUSIONS

The government of Manipur must support its tourism department to develop and maintain a comprehensive data of the tourist activities in tourism-oriented locations, hassle-free and quick processing system, reliable and safe mode of transportations and functional roads, and most importantly, local contacts or facilities including local guides, foods and stays with clean and basic facilities which would make all the difference in the experience for the tourists. The Inner line Permit system that was newly adopted by the government of Manipur should be designed to arrange for safe and easy travel regulations for the tourists and data collection hub for further studies and development of tourism policies for the state. It would be a better option for the state government to rope in local authorities, private organisations and International institutes to engage in coordinated activities in planning and implementation of the policies which will bring about a holistic development in tourism sector. Setting up administrative and executive support system to further cooperate in the enhancing tourist activities in the state will also be very beneficial.

Future Projects such as the Ropeway Infrastructure project at Ibudhou Marjing, Imphal west; Railway way project to enable passenger trains to travel to Imphal from other parts of the country, Development of trans-Asian highway to reach Thailand through Myanmar; Mega Handloom Cluster' at Nongpok Kakching in Imphal East District; construction of Manipur Institute of Performing Arts at Gurgaon, Haryana, etc will also play a big role in boosting the tourism industry to reach its potential.

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